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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the extent to which sexism exists in elementary and secondary textbooks. The findings of two recent studies of elementary and secondary textbooks are summarized and directed to four questions: Do textbooks describe the real world as females and males experience it in our society? Should textbooks describe the real world as females and males experience it? Can textbooks be nonsexist? Will we eliminate sexism in textbooks? The elementary textbook study indicates that boys are generally portrayed as active and girls as passive, and that adult males have a large choice of occupational roles whereas adult females have a more limited choice. The secondary textbook study suggests that the majority of women in textbook indexes are included because of some relationship to a male. Although these images are representative of the present sexist mold of our society, care should be taken to use only those textbooks that show alternative male and female role models and the complexities inherent in each of these roles. Extreme sexism "consciousness" on the part of textbook authors and editors combined with active concern by citizens groups, teachers, and education organizations can produce good nonsexist literature. (Author/DDB)

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One Perspective on Sexist Texts

Charlotte C. Anderson

The Textbook and the Real World was the title of a panel discussion at the southeast regional conference of the National Council for the Social Studies.* Perhaps, one of the impetuses for the panel was the current interest in and/or publicity being given to public scrutiny and criticism of materials used in the nation's classrooms. Whatever the catalyst, the program stated that the panel members would "address the following questions:

1. Do textbooks describe the real world?
2. Should textbooks describe the real world?
3. Can textbooks describe the real world?"

I was evidently the panel member whom the program identified as "an advocate of equal treatment for women."

With a perversity not uncommon in education circles, during the presentation I attempted to redefine both my identity and the questions I would address.

I do not see myself so much an advocate of equal treatment for women in textbooks as one concerned with the portrayal of female and male human beings whatever their ages. From this perspective, the questions and some possible responses take this shape:

Do textbooks describe the real world as females and males experience it in our society? My answer to that question is based partially on two recent studies of elementary and secondary

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textbooks. The study of elementary texts I turned to is one by Lenore J. Weitzman and Diane Rizzo reported in a pamphlet entitled Biased Textbooks: Images of Males and Females in Elementary School Textbooks in Five Subject Areas.[1]

Weitzman and Rizzo analyzed textbooks for grades 1 through 6 in science, math, reading, spelling and social studies. They consulted a panel of educators and publishers to determine the most widely used textbook series for each area in the five-year period from 1967 to 1972. This method worked for identifying all but the social studies texts. In this field they found little consensus so they chose a newer series which "appeared to be capturing the current market."

One dimension of the Weitzman and Rizzo analysis focused on the illustrations. When we juxtapose a graph showing the female/male population in the U.S. with the female/male "population" in these illustrations this is what we see:

(See Figure 1)

Do these elementary textbooks describe the real world?

And beyond sheer numbers what do we find? Boys are generally portrayed as active and girls as passive (Little boys don't sit and read? Little girls don't climb trees?). Girls are shown experiencing a wide range of emotions while boys project the "strong-silent"image (Little boys don't cry? don't laugh? aren't afraid?).

Adult males are shown in over 150 occupational roles. Working women are shown in the traditional roles of teacher,

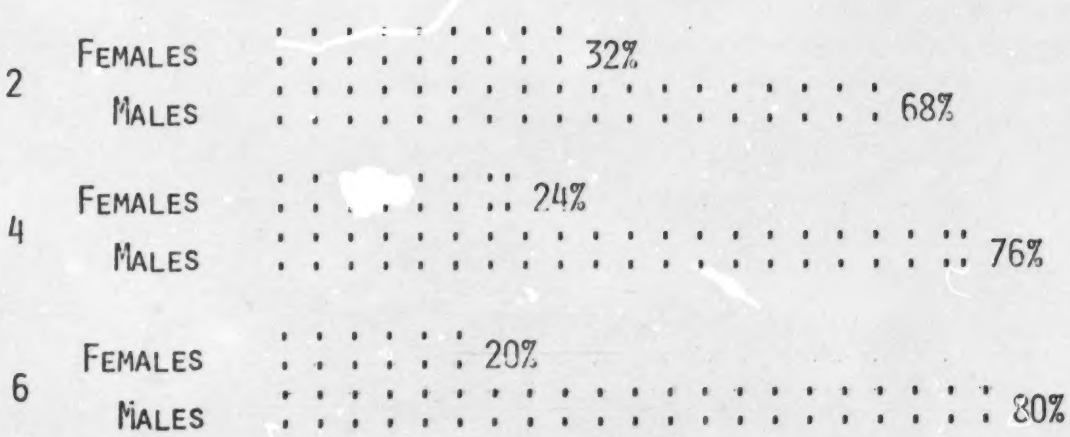
Figure 1:

POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES

ELEMENTARY TEXTBOOKS

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY GRADE LEVEL



(Elementary data from Weitzman and Rizzo study)

nurse, librarian and sales clerk. But almost all adult females are shown as housewives who clean house, bake cookies and care for husband and children. The many other dimensions of that role such as community leader, volunteer, organizer are not even suggested.

The study did find that mothers are very favorably depicted. However, motherhood is shown as a fulltime and very passive occupation. Aunts and grandmothers lead much more active, involved lives.

For an analysis of secondary texts I turned to the study by Jennifer Macleod and Sandra Silverman published in 1973. This study was based on eight widely used textbooks in United States government. The findings of the study were published under the title "You Won't Do": What Textbooks on U.S. Government Teach High School Girls. Once again a graphic presentation of these findings tells the story.

(See Figure 2)

Are women heard from and cited in proportion to their numbers? Of those 3% who were included in the indexes, few got there on their own merit but on the basis of some relationship to a male -- most are wives of Presidents!

Should textbooks describe the real world as females and males experience it? To this question I answer both "yes" and "no."

No, we can not afford to describe only what is there if we are to break out of the sexist mold of our society. For example, textbooks are doing a fairly good job of reflecting

Figure 2

SECONDARY TEXTBOOKS*

(U.S. Government)

Illustrations
(showing one sex only)

Females . . . 9%

Males 53%

Quotations

Females . .9%

Males 99.1%

Fem

Index

Females .. 3%

Males 97%

*Source: MacLeod and Silverman,
"You Won't Do"

the real world of the working woman. They <u>are</u> choosing the most representative occupations when they show women as clerks and teachers. The problem with this is, of course, that little girls and little boys use such depictions in their books as the roles to model themselves and their contemporaries after. The alternative role models that are either non-existent or buried in the body of the text must be offered to our children if change is to occur.

But when we look at the "real world" of human potential, the answer has to be "yes" by all means show reality. Show that men can be nurturing and little boys quiet, loving and gentle. Show that little girls can manipulate laboratory equipment and women be neuro-surgeons.

Textbooks should show the many possible roles any person may play. Adult males can be and are husbands, grocery shoppers, fathers, scout leaders, as well as mail carriers, truck drivers, lawyers, Presidents, and teachers. Adult females can be and are community volunteers, political activists, lawyers, mail carriers, truck drivers, as well as mothers, housewives, teachers, clerks, and librarians. Further, textbooks should show the complexities inherent in each of these roles. A real "housewife" is a far cry from the unidimensional cookie-baker of the elementary textbook.

The manner in which this "real world" is presented can make a considerable difference. For example, which of these alternative approaches would you prefer especially in early elementary texts?

Alternative 1: Photographs and illustrations depict women as typists, teachers, and in similarly typical roles. The accompanying text states: "Many women also work as doctors, laboratory scientists, carpenters, bus drivers."

Alternative 2: The text reads: "Most working women are currently employed as typists, teachers..." Photographs and illustrations depict women as doctors, carpenters, deep-sea divers and other currently atypical roles.

If we are serious about opening up the options to our children, we combine an approach similar to the one sketched in "Alternative 2" with a rational discussion of the social conditions which have shaped and are shaping sex-roles.

The third question then becomes not "Can textbooks describe the real world?" but -- Can textbooks be non-sexist? Sexism -- defining and limiting people according to the single dimension of sex -- is insidious and pervasive in our society. Those of us now "running the show" were socialized in a highly sexist society. We were unconscious of sexism and/or unconscious of alternatives to sexism.

How many of you women had "rings" before you graduated from high school? And if you didn't, did you feel somehow less a "woman?" How many of you men were at best ungainly athletes in boys' P.E. and felt less a "man" for it? How many of you "handy-women" had a chance to take shop in school? Or you men who throw a mean salad a chance at a home ec course? Did you just "know" there were certain things expected of you because you were a girl or because you were a boy?

As we try to work our way out of this we are awkward. It is like learning a new language or a game requiring complexes of muscle coordinations we have never used. We simply fall all over ourselves.

I like the contact of the traditionally male handshake. So I put out my hand when I'm introduced. But I've learned from a number of embarrassing instances to make a quick mental calculation of the age of any male I'm introduced to before I thrust out my hand. My male cohorts generally don't bat an eye or hesitate to grasp my proferred hand. But, "elderly gentlemen," on the other hand, tend to be visibly affronted by such "unladylike" behavior.

My male friends who suspect I am deliberately "conscious" cast sheepish grins when they fear they have committed some sexist taboo. And nobody seems to know what to do when he or she arrives at a closed door simultaneously with a member of the opposite sex. "Let's see, she's got that huge bag of groceries, a book, her briefcase and a cat in her arms. If I open the door for her, will she think I'm a male chauvinist pig?" or "Geez, if I don't hurry up and get there a step ahead of him so it's natural for me to open the door, he'll think I'm a 'pushy libber' if I open the door or an 'old-fashioned girl' if I don't. Whatever those are!"

We are awkward in trivial circumstances and in circumstances less trivial. Technology and institutions get in our way. And sometimes we simply fail to get the point. One example of a case where each of these elements probably played a part is the January-February 1975 issue of Today's Education. This issue

printed a synopsis of Weitzman and Rizzo's study together with excerpts from McGraw-Hill's Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes. The photographs accompanying other articles seemed to have been carefully selected to avoid sex-stereotyping. Yet as I flipped through the magazine I began to suspect a pattern to the cartoons. And when I had read the last I found that each one of the eight cartoons distributed through the magazine present an image that to me is definitely sexist. In four of the cartoons little boys are in trouble in school. In one the stereotypic male athlete is the butt of the joke. In two cartoons, little boys are again the focal point but their school success is ambiguous. In the final cartoon, a mother is conferring with either a teacher or the principal (male) and in the course of the report on her son's lack of attentiveness she falls to sleep. Taken as a whole these cartoons present not only a sex bias but an ethnic bias. Do only WASP boys attend and get into trouble in school with WASP adults?

Anyone who has helped put together a magazine, a film, a book, or a textbook series can give many examples of similar -- for want of a better word -- "oversights." A woman who helped edit a language arts series two years ago told me how appalled she was when she reviewed it recently. She now saw many examples of stereotyping and sexist descriptions and depictions she hadn't noticed before. What will we "see" tomorrow in what we are producing today?

Most of us who are concerned about sex-role stereotyping and view the women's movement as a humane, good cause worthy of

support are still at a level of consciousness that requires a great deal of effort. We haven't yet moved into a level of contexting where we recognize and react almost unconsciously to sexism. We still must make deliberate, conscious efforts to "see." We have to keep feeding ourselves information.

There is still a fourth question I believe we need to think about. And that is -- Will we eliminate sexism in textbooks? In the last very few years many people have become actively concerned about all aspects of sexism in the socializing agencies that shape our children. This active concern has taken many forms. Professional education organizations have formed official arms to guide and/or monitor the profession. The Advisory Committee for Social Justice for Women established by the National Council for the Social Studies is one example of this.

Concerned citizens in communities across the country have begun to wonder if their schools are opening opportunities to boys and girls alike. An exemplary group that has sprung from such concern is the Cornelia Wheadon Taskforce on the Socialization of Children in Evanston, Illinois. This group of concerned women received a small grant from the Roy Gillet Foundation to work with a local elementary school district. The Taskforce conducted teacher workshops on sexism and met with the administration to highlight sexist content in the curriculum. But, taskforce members feel their most potent approach was their bookcart of exemplary non-sexist books. The bookcart was taken to each school where teachers and children had an opportunity to explore this good non-sexist literature. These books gave the

teachers and children a new sensitivity to the sexist content of many of the texts and other books available in the school. When these teachers sit on textbook selection committees, the sexist texts will be in for a hard time.

Some of the most hopeful signs for the elimination of sexist textbooks are coming from the publishers themselves. Two major publishers have written guidelines specifically to eradicate sex bias in all their materials. Others have developed social studies series with consciously structured content and classroom strategies to help decrease ethnocentrism and stereotyping in all its forms.

But in this pluralistic society there are people who hold values different from those that are guiding some of us working to eliminate sexism. As we make headway against sexism, these people are beginning to publicly dissent. This challenge should compel us to better clarify our own position. In the process we hope we will become more articulate in giving well-reasoned arguments for the potential for all human development that exists when the straight-jacket of sexism is removed.

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1. Weitzman, Lenore and Rizzo, Diane. Biased Textbooks: Images of Males and Females in Elementary School Textbooks in Five Subject Areas. Resource Center on Sex Roles in Educ., 1974.
2. Macleod, Jennifer S., and Silverman, Sandra T. "You Won't Do": What Textbooks on U.S. Government Teach High School Girls. Pittsburgh: KNOW, 1973.